

## Language, Cultural Forms and History: The Case of the Bamum Kingdom

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This study is part of a larger project that involves the documentation of Shupamem, discussed in Nchare (2012), in terms of its grammar, its lexicon, and its oral traditions (e.g., folktales, songs, history and religious texts). It is designed to challenge what has been seen as a universal model of language and thought rooted in Western linguistic patterns by explaining how certain political, economic, and socio-cultural practices of Grassfields Bantu communities in Cameroon transpire in various communicative practices and linguistic expressions.

My dissertation describes a language that belongs to a geographically defined language group known as ‘Grassfields Bantu languages,’ spoken in the Western provinces of Cameroon (Central Africa). Through a comprehensive description of empirical data on essential aspects of the morphosyntax of Shupamem, I adopt a methodology and analytical approach in line with the Minimalist Program developed in studies, such as Chomsky (1995, 2001) and Kayne (1994). My investigation explicitly centers on: (a) the internal syntax of the DP, word order between the head noun and its various modifiers; (b) the syntax of negation that shows that Shupamem is a bipartite negation language (Bell 2004) with 8 different negative morphemes whose surface forms depend on the status of tense, aspect and mood; (c) the syntax of questions and focus; and (d) the syntax of body part expressions that are used in reflexive constructions. My preliminary description of Shupamem grammar thus offers a collection of distinct empirical puzzles that are theoretically and typologically significant for considering morpho-phonology, syntax and semantics. With respect to theoretical linguistics, my research centers overall on questions related to how meaning influences morphological and syntactic structures in Grassfields Bantu languages in general.

However, both my research and teaching since coming to NYU six years ago, has made clear to me that disciplines other than linguistics which have been concerned with understanding African cultures, such as history, art history, anthropology, and sociology, have often neglected the study of language in constructing their own hypotheses. They have often come to characterize significant innovations in African societies as borrowed from Western colonials. Perhaps one of the most dramatic instances of this misattribution is the understanding of the invention of the Bamum script, which most previous scholarship attributed to Western influence. But recent analysis has established that the Bamum King, Njoya, and his advisers actually invented a series of writing syllabaries which differ iconographically, morphologically, and phonetically from Islamic or Western systems and which cannot be seen as derivative. The invention of the Bamum script, instead, should be seen as part of an evolution of indigenous systems closely rooted in Bamum – and by extension Grassfields Bantu – cultural and linguistic patterns. The Bamum scripts were used to produce, among other things, a collection of manuscripts on the history of the people; a calendars; a pharmacopeia; maps for the kingdom; and agricultural techniques for local production. It is ironic that the encounter of the Bamum with the French and British after the First World War halted the spectacular rise of the Bamum culture. And it was, in part, through the close examination of the relationship of the Bamum script to the Bamum language’s structures itself that suggested the independent invention of the script.

This research project will explore the evolution of the generative qualities of Bamum iconography and grammar, as well as those of related precolonial Grassfields cultures, to demonstrate that previous

assumptions about the evolution of indigenous concepts, such as gender, time (e.g., months, weeks, and hours), the number system etc., are inadequate because they emphasize colonial influence rather than internal and indigenous developments.

To some extent this approach requires a reorientation of linguistic scholarship to focus on the ways in which language can be a medium for conducting an archaeology of cultural forms and practices, and how language can serve as an archive of the history of cultures and their modes of thought. This project thus addresses some of the issues that have long intrigued scholars of the history and anthropology of traditional African societies, such as to what extent can the culture of indigenous societies be grasped through sources and media that post-date colonial contact. For a theoretical linguist more familiar with phonemes and morphemes, I hope to be able to provide answers to these questions in a way that corrects many of the false claims that have been made about African colonies to belittle or simply undermined what have been achieved there before the colonial masters took over.

The recent rediscovery in Berlin of a series of phonogram recordings of King Njoya and various other Bamum cultural figures made in the years 1908-1912 by German missionaries and ethnologists, as well as newly cataloged archival materials in the Bamum Palace Archive, which are written in the Bamum script invented by King Njoya, in addition to my own linguistic field work, will provide crucial source material for this project. Many of these materials have never been studied before, and will provide crucial empirical data for this study.

My work with Richard Kayne, Chris Collins and Anna Szabolcsi stressed to me the importance of careful comparative research. That is why my analysis of empirical data seeks to bring in evidence from both closely related (macro-comparative) and unrelated (macro-comparative), to assess the generality of my proposals and the possible parameters that could give rise to some observed cross-linguistic variations. My other advisor, Jeff Good has also had a significant influence of my linguistic research. Being both a strong field worker and typologist, he brings the rigor of an experimental field worker who always checks his theoretical assumptions against empirical data that prove them. I also try to bring the same scientific rigor into my own research and writing.

These approaches have also informed my teaching. I have taught introductory courses on linguistics as a teaching assistant at New York University, as well as courses focused on Bamum language and culture for Saint John's University and most recently for Princeton University. These courses brought together research from various perspectives such as arts, history, anthropology, sociology, ethnomusicology, traditional medicine, linguistics to set the standards for researching on the cultures of Africa in general and Grassfields Bantu kingdoms in particular. Just as crucially, however, these teaching experiences demonstrated to me the extent to which previous scholarship in many of these issues will benefit from this new perspective.

In sum, this research project intends to use linguistic tools to analyze cultural forms, and to overturn the assumptions that innovations within African societies are the result of colonial "influence" rather than indigenous evolution. It will also demonstrate that language is an "archive" that provides an "archaeology" of culture. I will draw on newly rediscovered sources or newly available sources, in addition to my own field work to explain why culturally distinctive elements available in Shupamem offers an opportunity to introduce and discuss interesting cultural differences that have a significant influence on second language acquisition in post-colonial Africa in general.